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The Tie That Binds
by Senator Larry Craig

What defines America and makes it what it is? There is no single answer to this question. Certainly the Constitution, the framework of our government and laws, is a big part. Our culture is another big part: cowboys, apple pie, baseball, parades and fireworks on Independence Day, country music, rock 'n' roll, pickup trucks and many others fit the bill. Each thing adds a little bit to our national character, helping define who and what Americans are.

These things, and others too numerous to cover here, form the bonds that bind people who are both racially and geographically diverse. But there is one in particular that I would like to discuss today, and that is our common language: English.

On May 18, in the midst of the emotionally charged immigration debate, the Senate held a vote on an amendment to S.2611, the comprehensive reform bill. The amendment, sponsored by Senator Inhofe, proposed to make English the national language of the United States. It sets out guidelines for the Department of Homeland Security for a reworked citizenship test, requiring proficiency to pass. I voted for the amendment, which was approved with bipartisan support, 63-34.

Some have argued that designating a national or official language is a divisive act that will only result in isolation. It is important to note, however, that Senator Inhofe's amendment does not prohibit the use of foreign languages. It allows for those who cannot speak or understand English very well to have an interpreter or translation services if needed.

Designating English as the national language provides an incentive for those who wish to become U.S. citizens to learn the common language of our country. In learning this language, immigrants develop one more bond with those already here, and this is an important one, because it helps us to interact with and understand one another, rather than retreating behind a barrier of language. Learning English is also an important step along the path to successfully realizing the American dream, which is why many come to our country in the first place. Studies have shown that language is one of the biggest barriers to economic prosperity for newly arrived immigrants, so for their well-being, we ought to encourage them to learn English.

Do I demand that immigrants learn English? No. The adoption of American culture and language must be a voluntary act for it to be truly meaningful. And in reality, if someone arrives on U.S. soil with little or no knowledge of English, as many do, it can take months or years, even if they

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diligently pursue English, before they are functional or fluent in the language. We need to be sensitive to that kind of situation, which is why I have encouraged my staff to develop my website in Spanish (<http://craig.senate.gov/espanol>) as well as English. Some things are very important for everyone to know, and I don't think we ought to wait months or years to tell them, while they learn the language.

They should be encouraged to do so, however. America has accepted many different people and cultures throughout our history. And as we have done so, our culture has picked up bits and pieces of each one. This has transformed us into a unique nation, related to but distinct from, our English cousins across the Atlantic. In whatever Americans do, we adopt and apply the things we like or find useful to our everyday lives, whether it's our food, our music, our jobs or any other aspect of our lives. It is this flexibility that has made us the great nation we are today.

Learning English is an important part of becoming a part, and fully taking advantage of, all this great nation offers. We ought to encourage all who come to adopt this important tie that binds.